

The Acquisition of Plurals in English Writings

by Hong Kong Students

(B019182)

Dissertation of

MSc in English Language

The University of Edinburgh

Year of Presentation: 2012

Acknowledgements

I would like to express my sincere gratitude to my supervisor, Dr. Claire Cowie, for her inspiration, continual support and guidance throughout the research and writing process. Great appreciation also goes to my mum and fiancé for their unlimited support.

Abstract

This paper sets out to examine the effect of age differences on two groups of Hong Kong secondary school students' rate of acquisition. It also aims to look at the degree of L1 influence on the acquisition of plurals in their writing productions. A total of 57 pieces of student writings from their final-year examination were collected to investigate these two aims. It was found that both groups of students attained a similarly high rate of acquisition of plurals despite the obvious, and negative, L1 influence on their acquisition. However, age differences between these two groups of students were not a key factor in determining their acquisition of plurals. The kinds of errors made by students suggested that they have confusion about mass and count nouns. Hence, it is encouraged that the concept of distinction of mass and count nouns, from both grammatical and semantic aspects, should be introduced to students early in their secondary school education.

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Chapter 1 Introduction

1.1 Language Uses in Hong Kong

Hong Kong was once a British crown colony from 1842 to 1997. On 1 July 1997, it was officially handed over to the Chinese government under the ‘One Country, Two Systems’ principle. Subsequently, Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (HKSAR) was established. According to the most recent statistics from Census 2011¹, 93.8% of Hong Kong people are Chinese; 89.5% of them use Cantonese as their usual language. Only 3.5% of Hongkongers speak English for most of the time. Putonghua also accounts for 1.4% of the entire population.

Cantonese is the dominant language of informal communication with families and friends in people’s daily lives. It is also widely used in local electronic media and all forms of entertainment. It is popular for locals, especially those educated ones, to use Cantonese with occasional English words or phrases inserted in their conversation. Pang (2003:15) terms this extremely popular phenomenon in local people’s conversation ‘intra-sentential code-switching’. In view of this, Bolton (2000) crowns Hong Kong ‘the Cantonese-speaking capital of the world’ (Bolton 2000: 271).

English has always been the official language of the city ever since it was ceded to Britain. In 1974, the former British government passed an Official Languages Ordinance in which Chinese was also recognised as an official language. According to the Basic Law, HKSAR’s mini-constitution, English continues to be the official language alongside Chinese after the handover in 1997.

¹ The summaries of the 2011 Population Census of HKSAR are on: <http://www.census2011.gov.hk/pdf/summary-results.pdf>

1.2 The status of English in Hong Kong

1.2.1 English in its colonial past

Bolton (2003) offers a comprehensive description of the early development of English in Hong Kong from its pre-colonial stage to the end of its colonial era. He notes that contact between westerners and Chinese along the Chinese coastal areas, including Hong Kong, existed before the Opium War. At that time, English, in form of Pidgin English, was used by businessmen for trading purposes (Bolton 2003: 178-89).

Following the establishment of Hong Kong as a British colony in 1843, English became the official language and started to function in various domains in society, such as government, law, education and employment. At that time, English was only used by native English speakers. The majority ethnic Chinese did not use English in their daily lives. Therefore, Luke and Richards (1982:51) regard this situation as ‘diglossia without bilingualism’ in which two languages are used in the same domain but by two different groups of speakers. However, this situation started to change from the 1970s, when the Hong Kong education system moved from an elitist one to a mass ones, and thus ‘a system of mass bilingualism’ emerged (Bolton 2003:87).

Afterwards, English was extensively taught in the territory which undoubtedly increased students’ contact with English. In view of this, Luke and Richards (1982) characterised the kind of English at this unique status in Hong Kong in the 1980s as an ‘auxiliary language’, which means ‘a non-native language which is reserved for certain restricted functions in society and used by a restricted section of that society’ (Luke and Richards 1982: 55-56).

1.2.2 English in its present time

Seeing Shanghai and Singapore as its major rivals after the handover, Hong Kong projects itself as 'Asia's world city' (McArthur 2002: 358). Hong Kong's status as an international financial centre reinforces local people's belief that being able to speak and write internationally acceptable standard of English is important. Thus, the prestige of English in Hong Kong has not been tarnished despite its return of sovereignty. English is still the language that is most widely used in the domains of government administration, law, education, international trade and finance (Pang 2003:15). Hyland (1997) rightly points out that in Hong Kong, English 'is perceived among the community as having strong marketability, and knowledge of English correlates highly with income, social prestige and educational level' (Hyland 1997:193). Li also (1999) observes that a widely shared view among Hongkongers that English connotes a sense of authority and professionalism. In terms of social prestige English is second to none, both locally and globally, which in turn explains why it is so strongly coveted by practically all Hong Kong Chinese, notably middle-class parents (Li 1999: 97).

In 2000, the HKSAR government launched a territory-wide campaign, Workplace English Campaign, in order to enhance Hong Kong's competitiveness as an international centre for business, finance and tourism. It aims to heighten public awareness of the importance of having a good command of English in a workplace environment and to improve the knowledge of English among the working population in Hong Kong. Thus, Setter et al. (2010) concludes that English being the key to a successful career remains firmly in place in post-colonial Hong Kong.

In view of the tremendous social prestige and symbolic predominance of English, Li (1999) argues that 'value-added' is now a more suitable epithet than Luke and Richards' (1982) 'auxiliary' to characterize the status of English in post-1997 Hong Kong (Li 1999: 97). Pang (2003) proves that the high status of English was both the result of former colonial policies and the persistent demand for it as social capital by the local community.

However, despite its socially construed utilities and prestige, Li (1999) thinks that English is still a psychologically 'detached' language in the life world of most Hong Kong Chinese though he still agrees with Luke and Richards (1982) that knowledge of English means financial and occupational mobility (Li 1999: 76-77).

1.3 Medium of Instruction (MOI)

After the handover, the most drastic change is, perhaps, in the medium of instruction at the secondary school level. Before 1997, over 90 percent of the secondary schools were 'Anglo-Chinese', in which the MOI was English although in reality Cantonese was commonly used for various instructional classroom purposes (e.g. Lin 1990). However, as from September 1998, only 114 out of the 411 government or subsidized secondary schools are entitled to be English-medium. The remaining schools have to be Chinese medium. It is generally perceived that EMI schools admit bright students who are capable of using English to learn. Conversely, CMI schools are for less-able students who are believed to learn better using their mother-tongue, Cantonese. This policy was implemented amid a widespread of social concern and a great deal of discontent from parents (Li 1999).

1.4 The notion of ‘Hong Kong English’

The existence of a variety of Hong Kong English (HKE) has been a heated debate among local academics over the past 20 years. They are found to be in two opposing standpoints arguing for or against the notion of Hong Kong English.

Conventionally, scholars are against the notion of Hong Kong English. Luke and Richards (1982:55) observes ‘a clearly exonormative orientation of English in Hong Kong’ and thus they refuse to accept a variety of Hong Kong English. A language survey by Tsui and Bunton (2000) still echoes their observation and reflects local English teachers’ exonormative attitude. Pang (2003) comments that ‘local ESL learners have always wanted to keep standards very high, refusing to admit the existence of features like a local accent or to treat certain local usages as normal or grammatical’ (Pang 2003:15). Similarly, Joseph (2004) makes comments that ‘if one mentions ‘Hong Kong English’ to Hong Kong people, they assume the term in derogatory fashion, to identify their ‘mistakes’ vis-à-vis Standard English’ (Joseph, 2004:160). In light of these comments, Sewell (2009) gives an example to show local people’s strong exonormative preferences towards native-speaker models. Local examinations show a strongly exonormative view of accents, for example the Language Proficiency Aptitude Test (LPAT) which aims at ‘benchmarking’ the language proficiency of local English teachers.

Despite an abundant amount of unique linguistic features (e.g. McArthur 2002), like in the aspects of phonology (e.g. Chan & Li 2000; Hung 2000a, 2000b; Bolton 2003; Stibbard 2004; Chan 2006), lexis (e.g. Taylor 1989; Benson 1993, 1994; Carless 1995; Benson 2000; Chow 2001) and syntax (e.g. Gisborne 2000, 2009), are found in the

English spoken by Hong Kong people, English has been largely ‘localized but not indigenized’ (Pang 2003:13). Back to the early 1990s, Tay (1991:327) has already pointed out that the lack of ‘social motivation’ in the indigenization of English in Hong Kong. Luk (1998) also believes that ‘the easy availability of an idealized exonormative model of English, couple with the high status attached to it has made the development of an institutionalized endonormative model unnecessary’ (Luk 1998:103).

Contrary to most scholars’ opposition against the notion of Hong Kong English, McArthur (2002) presents some positive views on the presence of Hong Kong English. He justifies his stance by listing four defining criteria including (a) the long-term institutional use of English, (b) a localized form of English, (c) possessing a British Asian legacy and (d) having a close association with Cantonese and English. In addition, he lists a wealth of distinctive features of HKE, ranging from a Cantonese accent of spoken English, a set of unique grammars and a wide range of vocabulary which are either directly translated from Cantonese or closely related to the Cantonese equivalents (McArthur 2002: 359). Similarly, Bolton (2000) studies, in detail, the sociolinguistic background of Hong Kong and argues in favour of the establishment of Hong Kong English. Based on Butler’s (1997) five defining criteria, he provides evidence to support the existence of (i) a Hong Kong accent, (ii) Hong Kong vocabulary, (iii) a unique history of its own, (iv) a space for literary creativity and culture, and (v) the availability of some reference works.

Kachru’s (1982) well-known paradigm in the categorization of varieties and types of English in the world provides an angle to look at the issue of Hong Kong English. It

describes three circles: The Inner Circle, Outer Circle and Expanding Circle. The Inner Circle refers to those countries whose varieties of English have developed well; they are said to be 'norm providing'. Examples include the UK and USA. The Outer Circle refers to those countries which are developing their own features and standard in their varieties of English, and they are said to be 'norm developing'. Singapore and India are two prominent examples. The Expanding Circle refers to the countries in which their varieties of English are of no use in their speech community; they are still dependent on the norms of the Inner Circle Groups. China and Japan are some of the obvious examples (Kachru's 1982:133-135).

Hong Kong English does not fit perfectly well into Kachru's paradigm, as it is neither a typical Outer Circle English, nor a typical Expanding Circle English. In this regard, Pang (2003) points out that English in Hong Kong belongs so clearly to certain domains and fields of usage and that it has remained a 'high' variety whose development remains based on British or American norms. Hence, it hinders its indigenization (Pang 2003:15).

Schneider's Dynamic Model of the Evolution of Postcolonial Englishes (2007) provides another window to look at the same issue. His model comprises five phrases: foundation, exonormative stabilisation, nativisation, endonormative stabilisation, and differentiation. He discusses Hong Kong English in terms of this paradigm, and concludes that 'it can be regarded as having reached phrase 3 (i.e. nativisation), with some traces of phrase 2 (i.e. exonormative stabilisation) still observable' (Schneider 2007:133). By comparison, Singapore English has been marching towards phrase 4 (i.e. endonormative stabilisation) thanks to the process of nation-building,

modernization and economic growth which took place after its independence starting from 1965 (Schneider 2007:155).

In view of the above arguments for and against the notion of Hong Kong English, I share the traditional views of most scholars who are arguing against the establishment of Hong Kong English. I believe that there is still room for a fully-developed Hong Kong English to emerge in Hong Kong. However, for the convenience of presentation, HKE is used in this dissertation to refer to English in Hong Kong.

1.5 Reasons for this research

There are mainly three reasons for carrying out this research.

- (i) Plurals are a kind of linguistic factor, unlike those discourse-based factors, which can be handled and it is a feasible research area for a MSc dissertation;
- (ii) Plurals are chosen because it is well-studied in the domain of First Language Acquisition (FLA) but not in second language acquisition (SLA);
- (iii) Sufficient empirical data can be obtained to investigate one linguistic feature of English in Hong Kong and assess more closely the stage of fossilization or the end of acquisition.

1.6 Aims

The aims of this research are to

- (i) examine the effect of **age differences** on two groups of Hong Kong secondary school students' rate of plural acquisition;
- (ii) describe their patterns of acquisition of plurals in English;
- (iii) compare their rate of acquisition;
- (iv) look at the **degree of L1 influence** on students' acquisition of plurals.

1.7 Research Questions

This research sets out to answer the following three questions.

- (i) What is the relationship between age and plural acquisition among two groups of Hong Kong secondary school students?
- (ii) What is the pattern of plural acquisition in these students' writings?
- (iii) What is the rate of plural acquisition by these students?

1.8 Organisation of this dissertation

This dissertation consists of five chapters. Chapter one is an overview of the language situation in Hong Kong. Chapter two provides a comprehensive literature review on the topic of acquisition of plurals by both global and local English learners. Relevant literature review related to Second Language Acquisition is also mentioned. Chapter three details the methodology of this study. Chapter four presents the findings and discusses the results from the perspectives of possible L1 influence² and age differences. Some pedagogical implications are also proposed. Chapter five mentions the limitations to this study; some directions for future research are also put forward. Lastly, a conclusion summarises the entire research.

² L1 influence, in this case, refers to the influence of Hong Kong ESL learners' first language, i.e. Cantonese, on their acquisition of English.

Chapter 2 Literature Review

There is a huge literature on the subject of First Language Acquisition (FLA) of plural morpheme by English-speaking children; conversely, equivalent research in Second Language Acquisition (SLA) is scarce and scattered. This chapter is divided into three sections; the first two sections present overseas and local scholars' work on the acquisition of plural morpheme by both L1 and L2 children. The last section presents some literature review related to L1 influence on SLA.

2.1 Overseas studies

- **Cazden (1968)**

Cazden's study is a classic research on the topic of acquisition of plural morpheme by children. In a longitudinal study about language development, Cazden looks at the acquisition of five verb and noun inflections by three monolingual English-speaking children aged from 18 to 27 months' old at the beginning of the research. Participants were seen to go through four periods in the developmental continuum when it came to the acquisition of plurals. Period A is the first stage in which no inflection is produced; period B is the second stage in which occasional production with no errors or overgeneralizations are observed. Period C is the third stage in which production increases markedly, and errors and overgeneralization appear; while period D is the last stage in which the inflection attains the arbitrary criterion of 90 percent correct use. All the four periods last between 27 and 49 months. Cazden finds that of the two noun inflections, plurals reached the point of acquisition before possessives in two of his three participants' speech and each inflection appears first in particular linguistic contexts (Cazden 1968: 433).

- **Marcus (1995)**

He carries out a quantitative study of L1 children's plural noun over-regularization (e.g. *foots*, *mans*) and finds that their rate of over-regularization is low, showing that 'children prefer correct to overregularized forms. He concludes that noun plurals, like verb past tense, follow a U-shaped developmental curve in which children correctly inflect their first past tense forms, then go through a stage of over-regularization, and finally unlearn these over-regularizations and reach the adult stage' (Marcus 1995:448).

Concerning the types of errors involved in the acquisition of plural morpheme made by L1 English-speaking children, they are best documented by Brown (1973) as follows.

- (i) adding the regular form of the plural morpheme to roots that have irregular plural forms (e.g. *mans* instead of *men*);
- (ii) double marking of irregular plural forms (e.g. *feets* instead of *feet*);
- (iii) adding a regular plural ending to words that take a zero morpheme plural (e.g. *sheeps* instead of *sheep*);
- (iv) the addition of plural morpheme to mass nouns (e.g. *dirts* instead of *dirt*);
- (v) producing back formations, in particular, singular forms of nouns that can only occur as plurals (e.g. *pant* instead of *pants*).

After reviewing the plural acquisition by FLA learners, the following are some studies on the same topic by SLA learners.

- **Hakuta (1978)**

He studies a native Japanese-speaking girl, for seven about months, who was exposed to English at the age of five, and finds that the girl could achieve about 60% accuracy of the plural morpheme use in spontaneous production by the end of his study.

- **Ho & Platt (1993)**

They study the plural noun marking in Singapore English. They find that syntactic-semantic environments have a greater influence than phonological environment on the degree of noun plural marking in Singapore English. The three syntactic-semantic environments they look at include (i) zero determiners; (ii) +/- count noun modifiers; and (iii) + count noun modifiers. They find out that the marking rate of noun pluralisation is higher in A-levels (students aged 18) than that in secondary 1-3 (students aged 12-15). It is interesting to point out that SLA studies don't seem to look at the role of modifiers. Nor do they provide a detailed description of the acquisition patterns of noun pluralisation by different groups of students.

- **Jia (2003)**

By far, Jia provides the most comprehensive account of the similarities and differences between L1 and L2 learners in the acquisition of English plural morpheme. In her 5-year-long longitudinal study, she follows ten native Mandarin-speaking Chinese children who were aged between five and 16. She measures the participants' productions of the plural morpheme by an elicitation task and their spontaneous speech. Then she documents their error types and groups them into two major categories³ namely *RO* and *OG*. She reports that participants mainly made errors related to *RO*; missing plural inflections in obligatory contexts constituted the

³ *RO*, required but omitted, for which singular noun forms were used in the obligatory plural contexts or when transformations are needed in the case of irregular nouns. *OG*, over-regularization, for which nouns were over-regularised in both obligatory plural contexts and nonobligatory plural contexts (Jia 2003:1301).

majority of errors and so is the case with typically developing L1 learners (Cazden 1968). Participants also made all kinds of OG errors which are documented in L1 acquisition literature except backformation.

In her discussion section, she first compares the trajectory of the acquisition of English plural morpheme by L1 and L2 children. She observes that monolingual English-speaking children go through four stages when acquiring the plural morpheme (Cazden 1968; Mervis & Johnson 1991): preplural stage, transitional prerule stage, the transitional postrule stage and plural mastery stage (Jia 2003: 1297-1298). For L2 children, more than half of her ten participants who attained the plural mastery stage showed a classical learning curve—an initial period of accelerated growth followed by a period of leveling off. She observes that L2 speakers showed a larger time range of entering the plural mastery stage than L1 speakers, (7-33 months vs. 17-21 months). However, the average time points of plural mastery were similar for L2 and L1 learners.

Jia also attempts to investigate what the individual and age differences occur during the acquisition processes. Eventually, she finds out that the age of initial exposure to English and language environment help explain individual differences to some extent; the invariably richer L2 environment experienced by younger learners has led to a higher success rate on the plural morpheme mastery, whereas the invariably poorer L2 environment experienced by the older learners left much more room for their individual language learning characteristics to play a role.

2.2 Local studies

Turning to the literature in Hong Kong, researchers mainly adopt two approaches to this topic — descriptive approach and error/contrastive analysis approach.

2.2.1 Descriptive approach

- **Budge (1989)**

Budge's study is the only research on the topic of plural marking of English spoken by 80 Hong Kong speakers who are aged from 20 to 35. In her studies, she analyses proper and common nouns, plural non-head nouns and nouns which are always marked for plural but which some Hong Kong English speakers leave marked, e.g. *oversea*. She mainly looks at the relationship between pre-nominal modifiers and plural marking of nouns in their speech. Her findings echoes with Ho & Platt's studies (1993) that nouns referring to more than one of the same item were more frequently marked for plural if preceded by a quantifier (i.e. category 2) than if not (i.e. category 1)⁴. However, she does not look at any differences associated with age; neither does she look at the over-regularisation of mass nouns. She finds that there are two favourable linguistic factors for the plural marking in Hong Kong English – the presence of an unambiguous plural-indicating modifier before the noun and some less clearly plural-indicating modifiers in pre-nominal position. On the contrary, a larger 'distance' or 'time' between the plural-indicating modifier and the noun would inhibit plural marking. Phonological environment also has some part to play in the plural marking of their spoken English.

⁴ Category 2 refers to all pre-nominal modifiers that indicate the following noun should be marked for plural, for example, a range of, one of the. Category 1 refers to the pre-nominal modifiers which are neutral with respect to plurality or that does not indicate the following noun should be marked for plural, for example, other, certain (Budge 1989: 39).

- **Liu et al. (2006)**

They explore the challenges encountered by Chinese students who are native Mandarin speakers in the formation of English plurals. They examine the linguistic features of Chinese and English which may affect plural formation in English. They indicate that language transfer plays a significant role in the errors made by their participants.

- **Setter et al. (2010)**

They analyse, in great detail, the speeches from ten Cantonese-speaking students who are studying in the UK and observe that there are three distinctive features in the morphological marking of plurality in Hong Kong English⁵. These features include (a) singular count nouns are used in their bare form which are for generic reference; for example, “there will be giraffe” (Setter et al. 2010:60). This use can be attributed to their confusion in count and mass noun which is influenced by Cantonese. (b) The plural suffix is missing from plural nouns; and (c) the plural suffix is used to mark singular nouns (Setter et al. 2010:47).

2.2.2 Error / Contrastive Analysis approach

- **Chen (1979)**

Chen adopts an error analysis approach to look at the English compositions written by Chinese college students in Taiwan. She finds that errors related to nouns are the ‘second largest group of errors in her study’ (Chen 1979: 102) whereas errors in the use of plural morphemes are the most frequent errors in the use of nouns. The omission of plural morphemes is the major source of errors in this category. In

⁵ Here Hong Kong English (HKE) does not imply that the authors support the notion of a variety called Hong Kong English as discussed in section 2.6. In this case, HKE refers to the English spoken by Hongkongers.

addition, the plural ending was used where it was unnecessary. Usually errors made were due to students' confusion in mass/ count noun.

- **Webster et al. (1987) & Webster & Lam (1991)**

Webster et al. (1987) analyse the writings produced by Hong Kong secondary school students and attribute the language errors made to their first language (i.e. Cantonese) interference. Based on Webster et al.'s study, Webster & Lam (1991) provide further notes on the influence of Cantonese on the English of Hong Kong students.

- **Chan (2004)**

Chan looks at Chinese ESL students' noun phrases in English and Chinese from a contrastive perspective. She finds out that students encounter an array of problems with English noun phrases; it is partly because of the documented differences between these structures in the two languages, and partly due to students' incorrect mastery of the target language. She concludes that although not all learner errors are attributed to syntactic transfer, mother tongue interference plays an important role in this issue. She also reveals the potential effects of the negative transfer on nouns/pronouns and noun phrases between English and Chinese.

2.3 L1 influence on Second Language Acquisition

Schmit & McCarthy (1997) propose that L1 determines the ease or difficulty of learning a second language. Students' prior knowledge affects the way they learn, including learning a second or foreign language (Brown 2000). Language transfer⁶, especially **substratum transfer**, is the negative influence of the first language on a second language (Odlin 1989). It is identified as one of the major sources of errors among learners of a second or foreign language (Brown 2000; Lightbown & Spada 1999). It is often, as Lightbown & Spada (1999) rightly points out, 'plays a significant role' in students' language learning process. Similarly, in the case of Chinese students learning English, the prior knowledge of the language patterns in their mother-tongue may have remarkably affected their acquisition of English (Brown 2000; Lightbown & Spada 1999; Odlin 2003). As Jia (2003) finds out, one domain where language transfer is particularly prevalent among Chinese learners is the formation of English plurals.

In the context of Hong Kong, the majority of ESL learners and their teachers are Cantonese speakers. Such a fact has significant implications to language learning; the most significant one is that, as Kirkpatrick (2007) rightly points out, the English of such learners and teachers will *necessarily* be influenced by their L1 norms. Hence, the English of the great majority of ESL students and teachers will necessarily reflect certain linguistic features of Cantonese (Kirkpatrick 2007: 380). Joseph (2004) also shares this view; he comments that 'Hong Kong English speakers make the same

⁶ There are two types of language transfer, namely *borrowing transfer* and *substratum transfer* (cf. Thomason & Kaufman 1998). The former refers to the influence a L2 has on a previously acquired language, and the latter refers to the influence of a learner's L1 on the acquisition of a target language. For the sake of convenience, the term *transfer* (or *language transfer*) will be used to refer to *substratum transfer* throughout this paper (cited from Chan 2004: 69).

‘errors’ (from the point of view of Standard English) in regularly recurring patterns, many of them traceable to the influence of Cantonese’ (Joseph 2004:147). Moreover, Liu et al. (2006) observe that the use of plural forms presents challenges to many Chinese students learning English. The causes of such a phenomenon can be attributed to the differences between English and Chinese.

2.3.1 Differences between English and Chinese

English and Chinese are two fundamentally different languages. English is a Germanic language within the Indo-European language family while Chinese is of Sino-Tibetan family members (Fromkin & Rodman 1998; Li & Thompson 1982). English is phonographic with written symbols representing discrete sounds whereas Chinese is ideographic which consists of individual characters for every syllable and with each character representing an object or idea (cited in Liu et al. 2006: 129).

Kellerman (1995) suggests that the more similar the languages are, the more likely the mother tongue is to facilitate development in the target language (Kellerman 1995:126). English and Cantonese are two typologically distant languages. Therefore, it is common to find a wide range of differences between these two languages in terms of phonetics, phonology, morphology, syntax, semantics as well as pragmatics (Chan 2004: 33).

English is a language in which inflectional morphemes are used to show grammatical relationships (Klammer, Schulz & Volpe 2004); prefixes or suffixes play a significant grammatical role (Fromkin & Rodman, 1998). Compared with English, Chinese grammar is less morphologically complex (Li & Thompson 1981). Like other Chinese

dialects, Cantonese is not morphologically rich. There are few inflectional and derivational markings in Cantonese (Matthews & Yip 1994: 31). Grammatical functions and word meaning cannot be shown through inflectional or derivational changes as in English. Instead, word order or functional words are used to realise its grammatical roles in Chinese (Liu et al. 2006: 130). Norman (1988) further indicates that word order, particles, and prepositions carry most of the grammatical roles in Chinese. In terms of plural formation, Mandarin and Cantonese, plurality or quantity is not indicated by suffixation or any change in the shape of the noun. Instead, a pre-nominal morpheme or a numeral plus a classifier serve this function (Budge 1989). In English, inflectional morphemes are used to show grammatical relationships (Klammer, Schulz & Volpe 2004). There are a number of ways for plural formation in English, for example, the addition of plural morpheme *-s* or *-es*, the changing of one or more internal vowels, and the use of the same form for singular and plural (Liu et al. 2006: 132-133). Given such a great differences in the morphological structures between English and Chinese, it is, therefore, not surprising to find that Chinese ESL learners made mistakes on pluralizing regular count nouns.

Based on the above studies, it is observed that the focus of acquisition of plurals in SLA is not the same as that in FLA. Non-marking of count nouns seems to be the main issue in SLA with issues related to over-regularisation of mass nouns being the second focus. Moreover, L1 influence often seems to play a key and negative role in the language errors made Hong Kong ESL learners.

However, up to this moment, there is no study of HKE that neatly compares different age groups which allows us to see at which point of learning acquisition reaches a

ceiling. In this regard, this research sets out to investigate the relationship between age and plural acquisition among two groups of Hong Kong secondary school students, to look at the patterns of plural acquisition in their writings and compare their rate of plural acquisition. Therefore, this research attempts to examine the effect of **age differences** on two groups of Hong Kong students' rate of plural acquisition and to look at the **degree of L1 influence** on their acquisition.

Chapter 3 Methodology

3.1 A snapshot of Hong Kong Education System

At present, there are 526 secondary schools in Hong Kong. Only 114 government-subsidized secondary schools are EMI schools while the remaining 400 secondary schools are Chinese medium. EMI schools are more popular among local students and parents; they hold a widely-shared perception that students from EMI schools are more competent with a higher proficiency in English. Details of the issues regarding languages use in Hong Kong and the Medium of Instruction are in Chapter One of this dissertation.

Before entering the secondary school, Primary pupils' internal assessment results are used for the calculation of allocation bands and other education-related purposes. The best one third of secondary schools are Band One schools admitting the top one third of primary pupils in the territory. The subsequent one third secondary schools are Band Two schools admitting the intermediate group of pupils. The last one third of secondary schools are Band Three schools; the bottom one third of pupils go to Band Three schools.

Under the current education system, students are entitled to receive six years of free secondary education, from Secondary One (S1) to Secondary six (S6). Normally Hong Kong students enter the secondary school at the age of 12 and finish their education at 18. At the end of their secondary education at S6, they will have to attend a public exam—the Hong Kong Diploma of Secondary Education (HKDSE). It is the entry exam to the university.

Apart from HKDSE, secondary school students have to sit two examinations which are organised by the school every year before being promoted to the next grade. The exams are held in January (i.e. mid-year) and June (i.e. final-year) in every academic year. English Language, along with Mathematics and Chinese Language, are the three core subjects at the secondary education. Regarding the exam format, there are four forms of exams for assessing students' English proficiency, namely Listening, Grammar, Writing and Speaking.

3.2 Data Collection

The aims of this research are to describe the pattern of acquisition of English plurals by two groups of Hong Kong students and to examine the effect of age differences on their level of acquisition. As such, written productions were a feasible source of data which enabled comparison between the two groups of students.

Although longitudinal data are superior to cross-sectional data, it is not easy to find individual participants willing to cooperate with a researcher over an extended period of time because the work interferes with their daily lives too much (cf. Odlin 1989). Besides, a longitudinal research was not feasible given the time limit nor was longitudinal access possible in this study. Hence, a cross-sectional design was adopted making use of two groups of students' writings to compare their rate of acquisition and to predict if age differences affect their rate of acquisition.

The research questions underlying this study included the followings.

- (i) What is the relationship between age and plural acquisition among two groups of Hong Kong secondary school students?

- (ii) What is the pattern of plural acquisition in these students' writings?
- (iii) What is the rate of plural acquisition by these students?

To answer the above research questions, the writer approached around ten English teachers from Hong Kong secondary schools in her own social network in May 2012. More than 300 pieces of student writings on different levels and from various schools were collected. Most of them were students' coursework with some from their final-year examination. For the coursework, students wrote on different topics and in various genres. For the examination scripts, students were asked to compose a story or reply a letter. Argumentative writings were also collected from some senior form students. In view of the consistency and comparability of data, writing scripts from the final-year examination which was held in June 2012 from **Immanuel Lutheran College** were used as the principal source of data in this research.

3.3 The participating school and its students

Immanuel Lutheran College is a Band One school in Tai Po, one of the 18 districts in Hong Kong. The school commenced operation in 1983. It is one of the five English medium schools in the district; students use English to learn all subjects except Chinese Language and Chinese History.

The Participants

There were two groups of students with different levels of English proficiency participating in this research. Secondary One (S1) students, aged 12-13, named as junior form students while Secondary Five (S5) students, aged 16-17, named as senior form students were selected for this research. Their writing scripts from the final-year

examination were used in this research for the following reasons:

- (i) to ensure the productions from the subjects were not influenced by their teachers or peers.
- (ii) their untutored and unaided writings produced within a specific time limit under a highly monitored situation are the most genuine data from students; they truly reflect their competence and proficiency in English.

For S1 students, 58 pieces of writings were collected from two classes. The average length of writings was about 150 to 180 words and each one contained a considerable amount of nouns and noun phrases. They made up to roughly 10,000 words. For S5 students, 20 pieces of writings were collected from one class. The average length of writings was about 500 to 600 words and each one contained a certain number of nouns and noun phrases. They made up to about 10,000 words.

Hence, a corpus containing about 20,000 words was established for this study. Based on the corpus, the two elements being investigated in this study included:

- (i) the possible L1 influence on students' acquisition of plurals;
- (ii) the effect of age differences on students' rate of acquisition.

3.4 English Noun Classes

Regarding the types of nouns in English, they can be classified into Proper and Common Nouns (Quirk et al. 1985). Quirk et al. (1985) state that proper nouns do not have a full range of determiners and lack article contrast. There are two types of Common nouns—count and mass nouns. Count nouns take definite and indefinite articles and admit plural forms whereas mass nouns do not have plural forms, lack

number contrast and they are invariable (Quirk et al. 1985:128-130). They also classify nouns into different sub-classes based on semantic and grammatical senses. They note that ‘the distinction according to countability into count nouns and mass nouns is basic in English’. They point out that ‘there are many nouns with dual class membership’ (Quirk et al. 1985:128-129). Thus they provide a clear distinction of nouns based on their grammatical and semantic senses as shown by Table 1 below.

Table 1: Noun Classes

	Grammatical sense	Semantic sense	Examples
Common Nouns	Count	concrete:	<i>bun, toy</i>
		abstract:	<i>difficulty, worry</i>
	Mass	concrete:	<i>iron, butter</i>
		abstract:	<i>music, homework</i>
Proper Nouns			<i>John, Paris</i>

(Adapted from Quirk et al. 1985:129)

The three types of linguistic factors being examined in this study were as follows.

- (i) the types of marking of regular and irregular count nouns;
- (ii) the marking distinction between mass and count nouns;
- (iii) the role of presence/absence of pre-nominal modifiers plays in the marking of plurals.

3.5 The Coding System

Since this study focused on whether and how two groups of Hong Kong ESL students marked plurals when it was required in their English writings, a unique coding system was devised to determine the correct and incorrect uses of English nouns in the obligatory plural contexts in students' writings. This coding system was a combination and modification of Budge's (1989) and Jia's (2003) coding systems when they study the pluralisation of English nouns by Cantonese and Mandarin speakers respectively.

Cazden (1969) looks at the acquisition of five verb and noun inflections by three monolingual English speaking children. He establishes some criteria for asserting that an inflection is required in a particular utterance. His entire set of transcripts were coded as (i) supplied correctly when required (S_c), (ii) supplied in inappropriate contexts (S_x), (iii) required but omitted (O), and (iv) overgeneralization in form (OG) (Cazden 1969:435).

Jia (2003) fine-tunes Cazden's (1969) coding system when she studies the acquisition of English plural morpheme by native Mandarin-speaking children. Her transcripts were coded as follows.

(a) Supplied correctly, SC , which was sub-divided into:

- (i) SCr which refers to the correct use of regular plural endings /s/, /z/ & /iz/;
- (ii) $SCir$ which refers to the correct use of irregular forms such as vowel change plurals;

(b) Required but omitted, *RO*, which was further classified into:

- (i) *ROr* which refers to absence of the regular plural ending, e.g. book(s);
- (ii) *ROir* which refers to the use of singular instead of irregular plural form, e.g. child → children; foot → feet;

(c) Over-regularization, *OG*, which refers to the following types of errors:

- (i) adding a regular plural ending , e.g. -s, to roots, that takes an irregular form, such as *foots*;
- (ii) adding a regular plural ending to nouns that take no plural morpheme, such as *fishes* and *sheeps*;
- (iii) double marking of irregular plural forms, such as *feets* and *childrens*.

(Adapted from Jia 2003: 1301)

In view of the above coding systems, a unique coding system was devised as follows to determine the correct and incorrect uses of English nouns in the obligatory plural contexts in this study.

Table 2: A Coding System for Nouns in Obligatory Plural Contexts

Types of marking of nouns	Abbreviation	Explanation
Supplied Correctly (<i>SC</i>)	<i>SCr</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> it refers to regular nouns being pluralized correctly; e.g. photos, potatoes.
	<i>SCir</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> it refers to irregular nouns being pluralized correctly, including a change in the shape of nouns; e.g. activities, companies, children.
Required but Omitted (<i>RO</i>)	<i>ROr</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> it refers to the absence of the regular plural ending; e.g. chair (s), sandwich (es).
	<i>ROir</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> it refers to the use of singular instead of irregular plural form; e.g. child → children; person → people.
Mass (<i>M</i>)	<i>CSM</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> it refers to the correctly supplied mass nouns; e.g. time, food.
	<i>OM</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> it refers to the over-regularization of mass nouns; e.g. informations, works.

(Modified from Jia 2003)

Some coding criteria were also set up; they included the following:

- (i) There are many nouns which share two parts of speech; they can both be count/mass nouns and have the same meaning. In such a case, the part of speech would be judged based on the student's intended meaning.

For example, student S505 wrote sentence (*a*) as follow.

(*a*) Eating shark fins has stirred up much controversy.

'Controversy' would be treated as a mass noun and the student marked the noun correctly.

- (ii) Collective nouns, e.g. the needy; the elderly, would not be included in this study.
- (iii) Phonological effects of Cantonese on students' writings would not be studied in this research. It was mainly due to the limited space and the nature of data collected. Written data were not as effective as spoken data as a source to study the role in which phonology plays in plural marking.
- (iv) Some unreadable or unrecognizable words were found; however, they would not be analysed in order to maintain the quality of data.
- (v) Only common nouns found in obligatory plural contexts would be analysed based on Quirk et al.'s (1985) classification of nouns as shown in Table 1⁷.

When Budge (1989) looks at the plural marking of Hong Kong speakers' English, she groups the pre-nominal modifiers into three categories. She states that 'pre-nominal modifiers imply that the following noun should be marked for plural' (Budge 1989: 39). Similarly, in this research, the presence or absence of a pre-nominal modifier was studied and checked if this semantic link would have affected the plural marking in students' writings.

Eventually, a major indicator of students' English proficiency (i.e. rate of acquisition) was a composite percentage score which was adapted from Jia (2003).

$$\text{Composite percentage score} = \frac{\text{no. of correct plural tokens } (SCr + SCir + CSM)}{\text{no. of tokens in obligatory plural contexts } (SC + RO + M)} \times 100\%$$

⁷ Table 1 is in this Chapter on p.29.

Chapter 4 Data Analysis and Discussions

This chapter consists of three parts: Parts A, B and C. Part A is a descriptive session of each group of students' performance in the acquisition of plurals. Part B compares the differences in their rate of acquisition. Part C is an explanatory section looking at how students' first language, i.e. Cantonese, affect their ability in acquiring plurals; the effect of age differences between these two groups of students on their rate of acquisition is also discussed and explained.

Part A – Description of Students' Acquisition Patterns

In this section, the patterns of acquisition of plurals by S5 and S1 students are described; particularly the favourable elements which helped students mark plurals in their writings are examined. Their rate of acquisition, which is indicated by a composite percentage score, is used to show their English proficiency.

Based on the uniquely designed coding system and coding criteria⁸, 20 pieces of S5 writings and 57 pieces of S1 writings were coded. Table 3 below is a summary of the types of marking of nouns found in their writings.

Table 3: Distribution of types of marking of nouns by S5 and S1 students

Types of nouns	Types of marking of nouns	S5	S1
		(number of tokens)	
Count	SCr	476	317
	SCir	86	16
	ROr	95	69
	ROir	10	0
Mass	CSM	307	142
	OM	51	9
Total tokens analysed		1025	553

⁸ The details of the coding system and coding criteria refer to Table 2 in Chapter Three on p.32-33.

In short, a total of 667 count nouns and 358 mass nouns from S5 writings were analysed and the average rate of acquisition by S5 students was 84.6%⁹. Similarly, a total of 402 count nouns and 151 mass nouns from S1 writings were analysed and the average rate of acquisition of plurals by S1 students was 86.9%¹⁰.

To test the possible effects of age differences on students' rate of acquisition, two tests of Logistic Regression with *rbrul* were run. The first test was to check if age differences affected students' rate of acquisition of plurals in **count nouns**. In the test, the supplied/omitted plurals were the binary dependent variable whereas age (with two possibilities of S5 and S1), the presence/absence of pre-nominal modifiers and the regular/irregular forms of nouns were independent variables. The second test was to check if age differences affected students' rate of acquisition of plurals in **mass nouns**. In the test, the types of marking of mass nouns, (i.e. over-regularisation of mass nouns, *OM*, and correctly supplied mass nouns, *CSM*) were the binary dependent variable whereas age and the presence/absence of pre-nominal modifiers were independent variables. In both tests, individual differences among students were seen but left untouched as random effects.

In the end, 1068 **count nouns** were analysed in the first Logistic Regression test. From the test, the independent variables of age differences and presence/absence of pre-nominal modifiers were not statistically significant with p-values equaling 0.537 and 0.208 respectively. The (ire) regular form of nouns was statistically significant

⁹ The average rate of acquisition of plurals by **S5 students** was calculated as follows.
 Average rate (S5) = (a sum of all the students' individual rate of acquisition) / 20 = 84.6%
 The individual rate of acquisition by S5 students can be found in Appendix 1 on p.58.

¹⁰ The average rate of acquisition of plurals by **S1 students** was calculated in the same way as S5 students. Individual rate of acquisition by S1 students can be found in Appendix 2 on p.59.

with a p-value of 0.00963. It would be concluded that the regularity of nouns, but not age differences nor presence/absence of pre-nominal modifiers, was significant to students' rate of acquisition of plurals in count nouns.

For the second Logistic Regression test, 510 **mass nouns** were analysed. From the test, the independent variable of age was not statistically significant with a p-value of 0.334. The presence/absence of pre-nominal modifiers was statistically significant with a p-value of 0.00268. It would be concluded that the presence/absence of pre-nominal modifiers, but not age differences, was significant to students' rate of acquisition of plurals in mass nouns.

It was observed, from both tests, that individual differences existed among individual students; however, these differences were not due to age. It was also noted that individual differences among students were great. Since individual differences among individual students were not the major concern of this study; thus the random effects induced from individual differences were not addressed and investigated in the present study.

In order to check if there is any real difference in the rate of acquisition between the two groups of students, a T-test was carried out. The standard deviation (S.D.) among S5 students was 10.7 whereas the S.D. among S1 students was 13.6. It implied that there was no significant difference in the rate of acquisition across these two groups of students.

Despite the narrow differences in the S.D. between the two groups of students, their individual performances in plural marking which were shown in Figures 1 and 2 below provided more details about each group's performance.

Figure 1: S5 Students' Individual Rate of Acquisition of Plurals (in descending order)

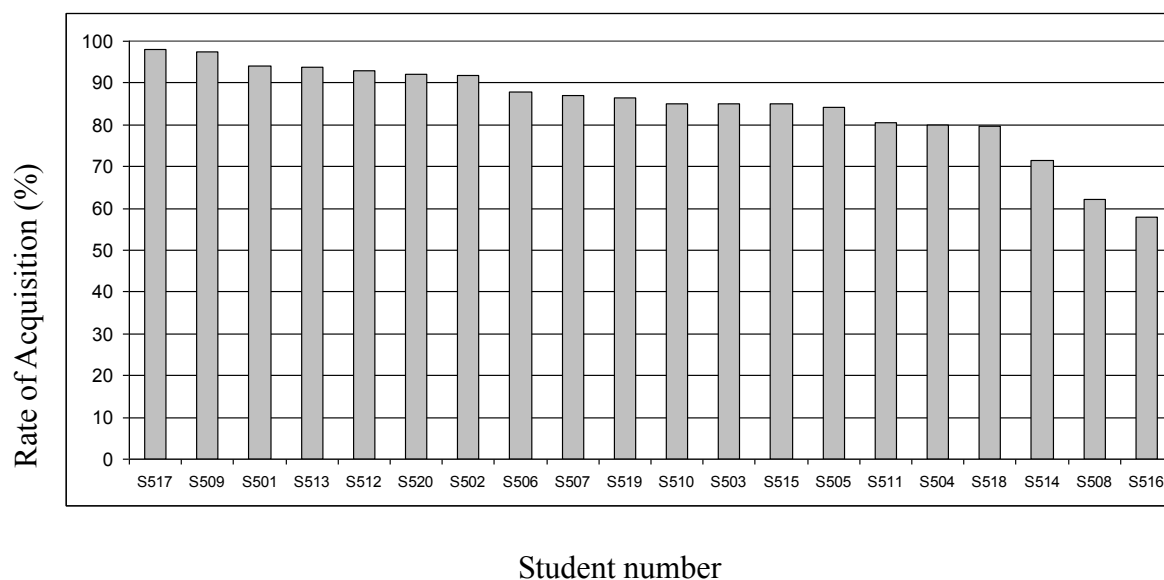
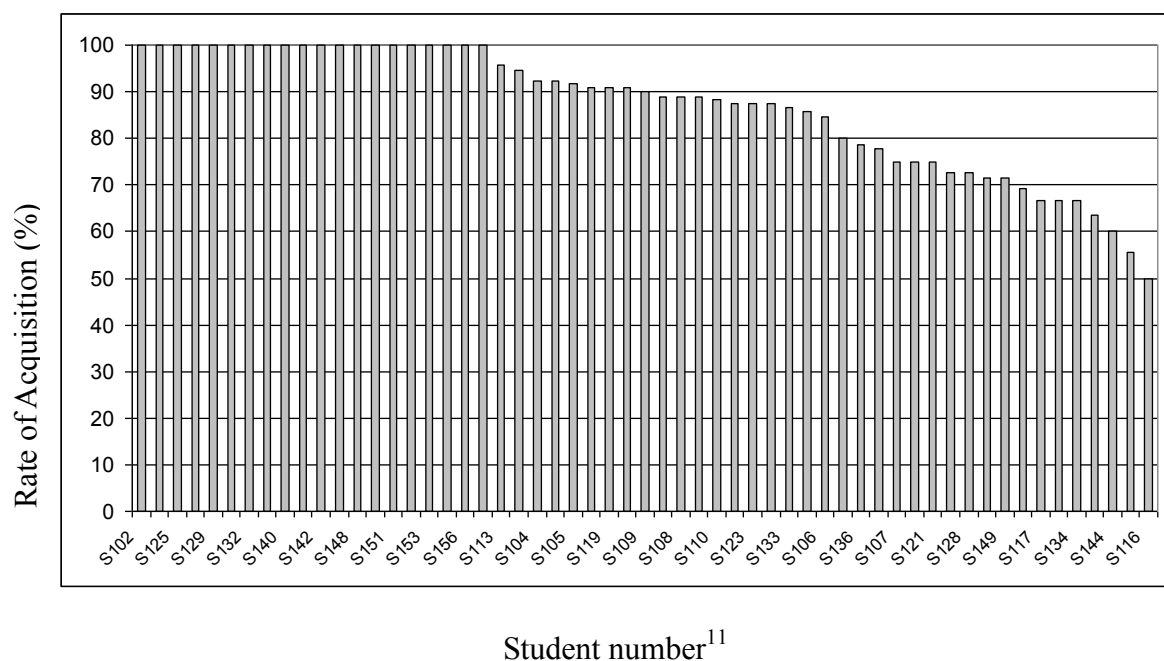


Figure 2: S1 Students' Individual Rate of Acquisition of Plurals (in descending order)



¹¹ Some of the student numbers were not shown in this figure due to the limited space. However, all the 57 students' individual rate of acquisition was shown in this histogram.

From the above figures, it could be concluded that there were more variation within the junior group (i.e. S1 students) than the senior group (i.e. S5 students). It was because more numbers of S1 students were involved in this research due to the small amount of tokens could be obtained from them. Hence, the more student participation, the more differences among students and more variation within the group.

Apart from the group rate of acquisition, Table 3 also revealed the patterns of how each group of students pluralised count nouns and mass nouns. Among the **count nouns**, S5 students could pluralise 84.3% of them correctly whereas S1 students could pluralise 82.2% of them. They both made some mistakes in the pluralisation of count nouns. S5 students failed to correctly pluralise 15.7% of the count nouns while S1 students could not pluralise 17.2% of them. Among the **mass nouns**, S5 students could supply 85.8% of the mass nouns correctly whereas S1 students could supply 94% of the mass nouns accurately. They also made some mistakes in over-regularisation of mass nouns. S5 students over-regularised 14.2% of the mass nouns while S1 students over-regularised 6% of them.

In terms of the ability in pluralizing **count nouns**, both groups of students were found to have similar proficiency; S5 students attained a rate of 84.3% whereas S1 students achieved a rate of 82.2%. As for the **mass nouns**, they could do similarly well in supplying the correct form of mass nouns. S5 students attained a rate of 85.8% whereas S1 students achieved a rate of 94%. It could be concluded that both groups of students could do equally well in pluralizing **count and mass nouns**. However, it was worth noting that there were 20 S1 students achieving 100% of accuracy in the pluralisation of nouns. Their full accuracy could be attributed to the small amount of

tokens found in each of their writings. The 100% of accuracy might have slightly skewed the overall rate of acquisition of S1 students and produced a high proportion of correct acquisition in count nouns and mass nouns.

Regarding the use of pre-nominal modifiers, Table 4 below showed the distribution of modified and non-modified nouns among the two groups of students. The proportions of nouns being correctly and incorrectly modified, as well as non-modified, were also detailed in the table.

Table 4: Distribution of modified and non-modified count nouns and mass nouns

			S5	S1
			(number of tokens)	
Count nouns	modified	Correct	97	114
		Incorrect	17	18
	Non-modified	Correct	466	219
		Incorrect	87	51
Mass nouns	modified	Correct	13	48
		Incorrect	8	4
	Non-modified	Correct	294	94
		Incorrect	43	5

Among the 246 modified **count nouns**, 39.4% of them were correctly modified by S5 students whereas 46.3% were correctly modified by S1 students. 7% of the tokens were incorrectly modified by S5 students and 7.3 % of them were incorrectly modified by S1 students. Among the 823 non-modified count nouns, 56.6% of the tokens were non-modified correctly by S5 students whereas 26.6% of them were non-modified correctly by S1 students. 10.6% of the tokens were non-modified incorrectly by S5 students and 6.2% of them were non-modified incorrectly by S1 students.

The number of non-modified count nouns was far more than the number of modified count nouns. It was suggested that students tended not to use pre-nominal modifiers when they pluralised count nouns. Among the correctly modified count nouns, both groups of students attained a similar correct rate; however, regarding the correctly non-modified count nouns, the proportion from S5 students was more than a double of that from S1 students. It could be concluded that S5 students were more prone to pluralise count nouns in the absence of pre-nominal modifiers than S1 students. It seemed that the presence of pre-nominal modifiers was more important to S1 than S5 students in the pluralisation process of count nouns.

Among the 73 of modified **mass nouns**, 17.8% of them were correctly modified by S5 students whereas 65.7% were correctly modified by S1 students. 11% of the tokens were incorrectly modified by S5 students and 5.5 % of them were incorrectly modified by S1 students. Among the 436 of non-modified mass nouns, 67.4% of them were non-modified correctly by S5 students whereas 21.6% of them were non-modified correctly by S1 students. 9.9% of the tokens were non-modified incorrectly by S5 students and 1.1% of them were non-modified incorrectly by S1 students. The high proportion (i.e. 65.7%) of S1 students would **correctly modify mass nouns** and the equally high proportion (i.e. 67.4%) of S5 students would **correctly non-modify mass nouns** suggested that pre-nominal modifiers were more important to S1 students in the pluralisation of mass nouns. It was also suggested that S5 students tended to pluralise mass nouns without pre-nominal modifiers. It seemed that the presence of pre-nominal modifiers was more important to S1 than S5 students in the pluralisation process of mass nouns.

In short, S5 students showed a higher percentage of correct pluralisation of non-modified count nouns and mass nouns. It was suggested that the presence of pre-nominal modifiers was more useful and important to the junior group than the senior group of students in the pluralisation of nouns.

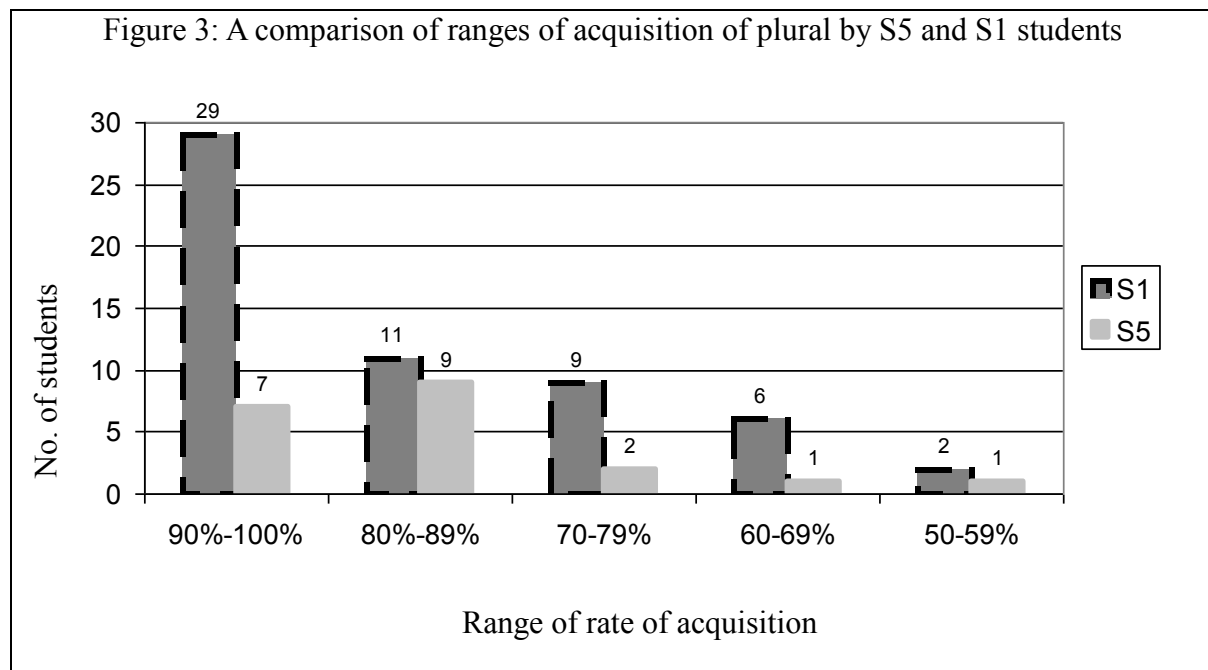
Part B – Comparison of Rate of Acquisition

To compare students' accuracy, Table 5 below tabulated a range of rate of acquisition achieved by the two groups of students.

Table 5: Ranges of correct acquisition of plurals by S5 and S1 students

Range of rate of acquisition	No. of students	
	S5	S1
90% – 100%	7	29
80% – 89%	9	11
70% – 79%	2	9
60% – 69%	1	6
50% – 59%	1	2
Total	20	57

Figure 3 below showed a graphical representation of the distribution of ranges of correct acquisition of plurals by S5 and S1 students respectively.



In terms of the **rate of acquisition**, S1 students achieved an average rate of 86.9% whereas S5 students attained an average rate of 84.6%. S1 students did slightly better than their fellow students in terms of acquisition of plurals in their final-year writing examination. From Table 5, 35% of S5 students attained an accuracy of over 90% while 50.9% of S1 students could achieve the same level of accuracy. These findings are against a generally shared perception that senior form students should be able to do better than their junior form counterparts. It may have something to do with the topics they were given in the examinations. For S1 students, 90% of them wrote a reply letter to a friend telling her about the arrangement of a birthday party. The word tokens being analysed in the study were mainly nouns related to food and drinks. A set of lexis for food and drinks were widely used by them; students showed a limited range of lexis in their writings. The word choices in their writings showed limited creativity. The majority of the nouns were concrete count nouns. Most of the mistakes tended to be careless mistakes. Two pieces of sample analysis are attached in Appendix 4 for reference. On the other hand, S5 students were given more space to show their creativity and originality in their writings; there were more varieties of topics for S5 students to write on. They showed a wider range of lexis in their work. The word tokens being examined were more varied and from a wider range of topics. Abstract as well as concrete nouns were equally used by S5 students. A sample analysis is attached in of Appendix 3 for reference. Hence, they showed a better understanding of the grammatical concept of count and mass nouns. Furthermore, there were 20 S1 students achieving 100% accuracy which was due to the small amount of tokens available for analysis in their writings. This set of data may have skewed S1 students' overall rate of acquisition and made it slightly higher than it really is.

As a result, despite a slightly higher rate of acquisition attained by S1 students, they did not seem to be more proficient than S5 students in terms of plural acquisition in their writings due to the less challenging tasks given and limited lexis shown. Nor did they have a better understanding of the grammatical concept of mass and count nouns than their S5 counterparts.

Part C – Discussions of Results

The following discussions focus on how **L1 influence** and **age differences** affect students' acquisition of plurals. Some **pedagogical implications** deriving from these two factors will then be proposed as means to help improve students' accuracy in writings.

4.1 Types of errors

A closer look at Table 3 again revealed the distribution of incorrectly pluralised nouns among the two groups of students. Among the three types of errors made by both groups of students, they tended to make mistakes on pluralizing regular count nouns, with 59.9% from S5 students and 88.5% from S1 students. They failed to pluralise regular count nouns; it is most likely due to the stark differences in the morphological structures between English and Chinese. Section 2.3.1¹² of this dissertation offers a comprehensive review of the differences between these two languages.

In terms of over-regularization of mass nouns, it was more common for S5 students to over-regularize mass nouns than S1 students. 34% of S5 students showed over-regularization errors whereas 11.5% of S1 students had the same problem. It is suggested that students are confused about mass and count nouns, or more specifically, they lack knowledge in the semantic sense of mass and count nouns. As such, many students were found to have over-regularised mass nouns, e.g. *informations* instead of *information*. It has something to do with the grammar system of their first language; it is because the distinction of count and mass nouns is not grammatically marked in their mother-tongue – Cantonese.

¹² For details of the differences, refer to Chapter Two on p.22-23.

In this regard, Joseph's (2004) also observes that 'one marker of Hong Kong English that regularly occurs in discourse samples is the lack of the Standard English distinction between count noun phrase and mass noun phrase'. He accounts for the lack of a count-mass distinction in Hong Kong English noun phrases by pointing out partial structural transfer from Chinese (Joseph 2004:144-47). Liu et al. (2006) also report that Chinese learners of English have difficulty learning English mass nouns, e.g. *furniture*, *mail*. He points out that Chinese learners tend to categorize count and mass nouns in terms of the semantic meaning of the nouns; concrete individuated objects tend to be considered as 'count' whereas abstract and intangible entities are considered as 'mass' (Liu et al. 2006: 60).

In short, students in this study are confused about the grammatical and semantic aspects of English count and mass nouns which leads to the problem of over-regularization of mass nouns.

With regard to the use of pre-nominal modifiers, S5 students showed a high percentage of correct pluralisation of **non-modified count nouns** and **mass nouns**. On the other hand, the presence of pre-nominal modifiers was more important to S1 than S5 students in the pluralisation process of both **count nouns** and **mass nouns**. Hence, regarding Budge's (1989) observation that Hong Kong English speakers tend to mark plural where there is some semantic reminder that the noun is to be pluralised (Budge 1989: 41), it is applicable to S1 students but not S5 students. In this study, the semantic links (i.e. the presence of pre-nominal modifier preceding a noun) seemed to play a significant role in S1, but not S5, students' acquisition of plurals.

4.2 Age influence

One of the aims of this study is to investigate the effect of age differences on students' rate of acquisition of plurals. The average rate of acquisition for senior and junior forms of students was similar, with 84.6% and 86.9% respectively.

From the first test of Logistic Regression with *rbrul*, the results showed that age differences was not a significant factor in determining students' rate of acquisition of plurals in count nouns. On the contrary, the (ire) regular form of nouns was a statistically significant factor. More students failed to pluralise regular count nouns more than irregular count nouns. It might be the case that students pay more attention to the pluralisation of irregular count nouns than regular count nouns. From the author's teaching and learning English experiences, Hong Kong ESL learners are taught to pay more emphasis on the pluralisation of irregular count nouns due to the differences from regular count nouns and the challenges in pluralisation. Therefore, students might not be aware of the importance of correct pluralisation of regular count nouns while they were writing. In the second test, the presence/absence of pre-nominal modifier was a significant factor in determining the correct pluralisation of mass nouns. Again, age differences were not a significant factor.

In terms of the correctly pluralised nouns, Table 3 displayed the frequency of the three kinds of pluralised nouns. For S5 students, 55.4% of the nouns were regular count nouns, 9.6% of them were irregular count nouns and 35% were mass nouns. On the other hand, for S1 students, 66.7% of the nouns were regular, 3.4% of them were irregular nouns and 29.9% were mass nouns. The comparative even distribution of frequency of nouns being pluralised by S5 students showed that they tended to

pluralise all three kinds of nouns in their writings; on the contrary, S1 students mainly pluralised regular count nouns and mass nouns. It showed that S5 students could pluralise a wider range of nouns than S1 students. The elder students are cognitively more complex with more experience in learning English. It may have helped them pluralise varied types of nouns in their writings.

From the above analysis, it confirms with Jia's (2003) conclusion that 'age did not seem to be a defining factor in the ultimate level of plural proficiency' (Jia 2003: 1309). The results showed that age differences between the two groups of students are not a key factor in determining students' ability in mastering the pluralisation of count and mass nouns in English. However, age differences seems to play a role in pluralizing different kinds of nouns; the elder the students, the more able they are in pluralizing varied types of nouns in English.

4.3 Pedagogical implications

Table 3 showed the distribution of incorrectly pluralised noun classes among the two groups of students. S5 students were found to have mass and count noun confusion which was reflected by a reported percentage of 34% relating to over-regularisation of mass nouns. It shows that they have inadequate knowledge in the grammatical and semantic differences of mass and count nouns. Only 11.5% of S1 students were reported to have problems with over-regularization of mass nouns; however, it cannot be concluded that they have a better concept about mass and count noun distinction than their S5 counterparts. Judging from the marking requirements of their writings, the number of words in junior form's writings is far less than that of senior form's, with 150 words and 500 words respectively. In addition, S5 students have to express

more complicated ideas using a wider range of lexis in their writings. It is suggested that fluency may not be senior form students' primary concern. At the same time, the content and word requirements in junior form's writings are far more lenient. They could pay more attention to plural marking than S5 students. Thus it is likely to be the case that S1 students are more aware of the accuracy in their writings than S5 students. In light of this, it is an appropriate stage to introduce the concept of mass and count nouns to S1 students; it would be easier for them to manage this concept when they are not required to write too much. Differences in morphological marking between English and Chinese should also be included in the English curriculum in secondary school in order to help raise students' language awareness.

In terms of teaching, teachers should have some knowledge of students' ability in pluralisation of nouns. Age differences are not a key factor in determining their ability in pluralisation of English nouns. Junior form students enter the secondary school with a high percentage of accuracy in English noun pluralisation. Teachers should take full notice of this and pay attention to their students' ability in pluralisation throughout their secondary school education and help them achieve 100% accuracy by all means. Teaching students to differentiate mass and count nouns, refreshing their knowledge in pluralisation of regular count nouns constantly and emphasizing the importance of noun pluralisation in their writings are all the possible pedagogical solutions.

As Kirkpatrick (2007) states, 'the English of such learners and teachers will *necessarily* be influenced by their L1 norms' (Kirkpatrick (2007: 380), L1 influence seems to be an unavoidable effect on English learners in Hong Kong. Instead of

looking at the negative side of the L1 influence on the English learning process, teachers can point out the mistakes that most ESL learners make and help them learn from those mistakes. Learning from mistakes made by peers is also one of the best ways for students to learn. It helps reinforce students' confidence that they are able to learn it well and not afraid of making mistakes of such kinds on their own.

Chapter 5 Conclusion

This research sets out to investigate the possible effect of age differences on students' rate of acquisition of plurals in English. It also aims to look at the degree of L1 influence on students' acquisition of plurals as well as to document their patterns of acquisition. In spite of the results obtained in the last chapter, there are a number of limitations to this research.

5.1 Limitations

First of all, the amount of data analysed is obviously very small, with 20 and 57 pieces of writings from S5 and S1 students respectively. The results from such a small sample are not representative enough to draw any reliable conclusions; but it can only carry indicative meaning. Secondly, this study is only a preliminary attempt to compare two levels of students with different abilities in the acquisition of plurals. It is believed that the scope of investigation could be much broadened by the inclusion of a larger range of participants. Thirdly, in terms of coding of data, only the presence or absence of pre-nominal modifiers was being looked at. In some ways, this was not an ideal means to test the relationship between the semantic link and students' acquisition of nouns. It would have been more ideal if classification of pre-nominal modifiers were to be used. A detailed analysis of the usage of the pre-nominal modifiers in students' writings would have provided some insights into the importance of pre-nominal modifiers in students' acquisition process. Furthermore, the participants' proficiency levels were identified based on their class levels. Students' individual differences in terms of language ability and language awareness were not taken into consideration. It may have helped achieve a more uniform analysis; however, a more detailed inspection of individual differences may also reveal some

interesting facts about their acquisition patterns. In addition, regarding the research methodology, longitudinal rather than cross-sectional data would have been more ideal to provide a more reliable and accurate picture of how students acquire plurals in English throughout their secondary school education. Lastly, for the reasons of limited space and time, this study has not attempted to analyse the phonological effects of Cantonese on students' acquisition of plurals in their written productions.

5.2 Future Research

Given the above-mentioned limitations, some directions for future research are proposed. Firstly, a longitudinal study is required so that the same group of students can be followed and their examination data can be kept track of for six consecutive years throughout their secondary school education. Secondly, it is worth comparing students from different schools with varied language proficiencies. Finally, spoken data should also be included in the research; how phonological effects of participants' first language, i.e. Cantonese, play on the acquisition of noun pluralisation can then be taken into consideration.

All these proposals help enhance the representativeness and comprehensiveness of the research. It also helps provide a more reliable and accurate picture of how Hong Kong ESL students acquire plurals in English. As a result, more specific advice or remedies could be given to students at different stages of their English learning process in their secondary school education.

5.3 Conclusion

To summarise, this study presents some confirmatory evidence of L1 influence on Hong Kong secondary school students' acquisition of plurals in their writings. It is found that both senior and junior forms students attain a similarly high rate of acquisition. Among the kinds of errors found, the majority of students had problems with pluralisation of regular count nouns which can be attributed to the differences in the grammatical structures, particularly in the domain of morphological marking, between English and Chinese. Students are also found to have encountered difficulty in over-regularization of mass nouns which reflects their insufficient knowledge in the distinction of the grammatical and semantic aspects of mass and count nouns. Surprisingly, age differences do not have a direct relationship with students' rate of acquisition. Finally, it is encouraged that the concept of distinction of mass and count nouns, from both grammatical and semantic aspects, should be introduced to students early in their secondary school education. Some knowledge of the differences in morphological markings between English and Chinese should also be acquired by students. It would help raise their language awareness and their language proficiency in the end.

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Appendices

Appendix 1—S5 students' individual rate of acquisition

Table 6a: S5 students' individual rate of acquisition of plurals (S501-S510)

	Student number									
	S501	S502	S503	S504	S505	S506	S507	S508	S509	S510
Rate of acquisition (%)	94.0	91.7	85.0	80.0	84.1	87.9	87.0	62.1	97.4	85.1

Table 6b: S5 students' individual rate of acquisition of plurals (S511-S520)

	Student number									
	S511	S512	S513	S514	S515	S516	S517	S518	S519	S520
Rate of acquisition (%)	80.6	93.0	93.8	71.4	84.9	58.0	98.1	79.7	86.5	92.1

Appendix 2—S1 students' individual rate of acquisition

Table 7a: S1 students' individual rate of acquisition of plurals (S101-S110)

	Student number									
	S101	S102	S103	S104	S105	S106	S107	S108	S109	S110
Rate of acquisition (%)	69.2	100	88.9	92.3	91.7	84.6	75	88.9	90	88.2

Table 7b: S1 students' individual rate of acquisition of plurals (S111-S120)

	Student number									
	S111	S122	S113	S114	S115	S116	S117	S118	S119	S120
Rate of acquisition (%)	63.6	72.7	95.8	92.3	75	50	66.7	87.5	90.9	100

Table 7c: S1 students' individual rate of acquisition of plurals (S121-S130)

	Student number									
	S121	S122	S123	S124	S125	S126	S127	S128	S129	S130
Rate of acquisition (%)	75	90.9	87.5	55.6	100	100	71.4	72.7	100	66.7

Table 7d: S1 students' individual rate of acquisition of plurals (S131-S140)

	Student number									
	S131	S132	S133	S134	S135	S136	S137	S138	S139	S140
Rate of acquisition (%)	100	100	86.7	66.7	100	78.6	88.9	80	94.7	100

Table 7e: S1 students' individual rate of acquisition of plurals (S141-S150)

	Student number									
	S141	S142	S143	S144	S145	S146	S147	S148	S149	S150
Rate of acquisition (%)	100	100	77.8	60	85.7	91	100	100	71.4	100

Table 7f: S1 students' individual rate of acquisition of plurals (S151-S158)

	Student number							
	S151	S152	S153	S154	S155	S156	S157	S158
Rate of acquisition (%)	100	100	100	87.5	100	100	100	No token found

Appendix 3—an sample analysis of S5 writing

student no.	tokens	supplied/omitted	types of marking	mass/count	Pre-nominal modifier
S501	email	omitted	ROr	C	abs
	some suggestions	supplied	SCr	C	pres
	some points	supplied	SCr	C	pres
	people	supplied	CSM	C	abs
	our minds	supplied	SCr	C	abs
	our horizons	supplied	SCr	C	abs
	the difficulties	supplied	Scir	C	abs
	all these experiences	supplied	SCr	C	pres
	books	supplied	SCr	C	abs
	these experiences	supplied	SCr	C	pres
	communication skills	supplied	SCr	C	abs
	problem-solving skills	supplied	SCr	C	abs
	many chances	supplied	SCr	C	pres
	charity sale	omitted	ROr	C	abs
	events	supplied	SCr	C	abs
	these two events	supplied	SCr	C	pres
	people	supplied	Scir	C	abs
	flags	supplied	SCr	C	abs
	other stuff	supplied	CSM	M	abs
	communication skills	supplied	SCr	C	abs
	many obstacles	supplied	SCr	C	pres
	problem-solving skills	supplied	SCr	C	abs
	these skills	supplied	SCr	C	pres
	our daily lives	supplied	Scir	C	abs
	some points	supplied	SCr	C	pres
	opponents	supplied	SCr	C	abs
	rewards	supplied	SCr	C	abs
	opponents	supplied	SCr	C	abs
	much time	supplied	CSM	M	pres
	studies	supplied	CSM	C	abs
	our studies	supplied	CSM	C	abs
	all the suggestions	supplied	SCr	C	pres
	our lives	supplied	Scir	C	abs

Appendix 4— Two pieces of sample analysis of S1 writing

student no.	tokens	supplied/omitted	types of marking	count/mass	pre-nominal modifier
S121	details	supplied	SCr	C	abs
	details	supplied	SCr	C	abs
	food	supplied	CSM	M	abs
	chips	supplied	SCr	C	abs
	chicken wings	supplied	SCr	C	abs
	egg tarts	supplied	SCr	C	abs
	kind	omitted	ROr	C	abs
	snacks	supplied	SCr	C	abs
	drinks	supplied	SCr	C	abs
	some coke	supplied	CSM	M	pres
	juice	supplied	CSM	M	abs
	games	supplied	SCr	C	abs
	teachers	supplied	SCr	C	abs
	classmate	omitted	ROr	C	abs
	teacher	omitted	ROr	C	abs
	student	omitted	ROr	C	abs
S139	details	supplied	SCr	C	abs
	classmate	omitted	ROr	C	abs
	teachers	supplied	SCr	C	abs
	lots of fun	supplied	CSM	M	pres
	many games	supplied	SCr	C	pres
	many kinds	supplied	SCr	C	pres
	food	supplied	CSM	M	abs
	pizzas	supplied	SCr	C	abs
	rice	supplied	CSM	M	abs
	sandwiches	supplied	SCr	C	abs
	salad	supplied	CSM	M	abs
	sushi	supplied	CSM	M	abs
	sashimi	supplied	CSM	M	abs
	food	supplied	CSM	M	abs
	sushi	supplied	CSM	M	abs
	sashimi	supplied	CSM	M	abs
	food	supplied	CSM	M	abs
	photos	supplied	SCr	C	abs
	joy	supplied	CSM	M	abs